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ABSTRACT

Relationships between females and males are heavily influenced by the ways people perceive the possibility of sexual involvement. In the United States, a physical involvement across sexual boundaries is often conceptualized as a power relationship. Consequently, male-female sexual interaction may be perceived by the participants as a win-lose game. Participants in an intersex dyad tend to structure this relationship either as negotiation to establish a balance of power (an attitude labeled type A), or to view their communication as a joint venture for mutual benefit (type B). These motivations and attitudes predispose the emergence of win-lose or win-win games as the norms of their interactions. Men and women both fit the descriptions of types A and B and their behavior follows similar patterns. Type A women may be sex teases or may achieve marriage by making a deal with sexual power; type A males may behave like a version of the sex tease who keeps sex at a superficial gamesmanship level. Becoming a type B man or woman in the U. S. requires much critical thinking and effective self-persuasion, but most of all it requires a willingness to be open in a relationship. (MKM)

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INTERSEXUAL COMMUNICATION IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Introduction

While physical intersexual involvement is universal, prevailing attitudes towards this activity vary widely from culture to culture. It is these attitudes which frame intersexual involvement as collaboration or as competition.

In America the complex fabric made by weaving together many ethnic, national, and religious influences places the sex act in a unique context. Many of these antecedents of our culture specified approved and disapproved practices and brought about contrasting judgments of what is moral and immoral in the conduct of heterosexual relations. The ideal format for intersexual involvement would be sharing; in contrast is the format of force or competition which pervades many of our everyday activities. Incompatible life styles, contradictory moral codes and an incredibly high and general interest in sexual matters characterize our current society. Perhaps an effort should be made to find within the multicultural mix that is Bicentennial America, norms which have been perpetuated and norms which might be changing in regards to intersexual involvement.

By centering attention upon currently viable concepts in the behavioral sciences, power relationships and game theory, and upon communication as a dyadic process, we can describe predominant and emerging tendencies in the conduct of

heterosexual interactions. We will examine these as to resulting Female and Male attitudinal and behavioral patterns. We will attempt to assess consequences of the predominant modes as these affect immediate and long-term relations between the sexes in American culture, late Twentieth Century, and the influence which emerging tendencies may have on these consequences.

Abstract

Relationships between females and males are heavily influenced by the ways people perceive the possibility of physical sexual involvement. In America a physical involvement across sexual boundaries is often conceptualized as a power relationship. Consequently, male-female sexual interaction may be perceived by the participants as a WIN-LOSE game.

This paper explores ways in which American culture imposes a power model upon relations between the sexes. It shows effects of this preoccupation with power upon marriage and other lasting female-male associations. Finally it suggests that intersexual communication, if viewed as a dyadic bonding of mutual purposing, may facilitate more pleasant and more productive interactions between the sexes.

The Options

There are few persons who would deny that for intersexual communication, the minimum unit of participation would consist

of two persons, a dyad. It is this unit and its functioning in communicative behaviors which bears examination. Persons who are members of an intersex dyad tend to structure this relationship either as negotiation to establish a balance of power, a motivation we label "Type A," or to view their communication as a joint venture for mutual benefit, an attitude we term "Type B." These motivations and attitudes predispose the emergence of WIN-LOSE or WIN-WIN games as the norms of their interactions.

Females

Due to cultural influences many women in America become Type A persons who conceptualize sexual involvement with male persons as a WIN-LOSE game. Because of different enculturating experiences, Type B women perceive physical sex involvement with a males as a WIN-WIN game. The nature of this startling contrast of Type A and Type B women can be understood through examining typical reactions to a proposal to initiate sexual interaction.

When a Type A woman is propositioned openly or directly she interprets this to mean that the man is attempting to meet his needs at her expense. She feels that she has been asked to make a sacrifice for his selfish benefit. Consequently his request can only be a defeat for her and victory for him. He WINS, she LOSES, is her perception.

When a Type B woman is "propositioned," her perception is that she has been invited to share a significant experience. Through the process of collective decision-making, estimating the probability of mutual benefit from mutual purpose, she accepts or rejects the proposition. If she concludes that both participants can be reasonably sure of a mutually satisfactory experience with no substantial penalties, she is free to proceed with the activity; if she concludes otherwise, she is free to halt the activity at this point. She knows that sex should be a WIN-WIN game. Power considerations are ideally minimal, since the persons involved perceive the interaction as a joint venture conducted by equals.

A classic example of a Type A female is the Sex Tease who "advertises but does not deliver." When she is strongly attracted to a man and accepts his proposition, she perceives herself as losing. If she is intelligent and strongly competitive, as she usually is, losing to a worthy opponent (say a respected male who is attractive physically) is less acceptable than is deliberately throwing the game to an inferior player to gain other ends (her sexual satisfaction). The Sex Tease finds it difficult, if not impossible, to accept a proposition from a man she likes, respects, even loves.

But the Sex Tease needs ego reinforcement. She needs to maintain her self image as an attractive woman even though she is unable to follow sexual impulses. She accomplishes

this by persuading attractive men to commit themselves. By using verbal and nonverbal behavior which men perceive as an invitation, she can incite overt sexual aggression. When the man has unmistakably revealed his intent, she can reject his advances. Each man who commits himself only to be turned away proves her attractiveness, tangibly. At a deeper level, it is possible that dissonance caused by rejecting a sincere advance that has been deliberately provoked may convert her perceived WIN-LOSE game into the LOSE-LOSE game which it is.

Or the Sex Tease may meet her sexual needs through an ingenious solution to winning her game. She finds that she can have casual sexual relations with men she can dominate. If she picks up a stranger, takes him home, uses him and sends him away, she may perceive herself as having a WIN. Her contempt for her sexual objects and her total control of their interaction with her, demonstrate that she has the power. Her problem is that her sex life is necessarily with strangers and can never last or be mutually purposeful. And, she may find that she cannot make love with a person she respects.

Type B women typically find their romantic male relationships building toward ultimate physical sexual interaction. A Type A woman with the Sex Tease syndrome may find it easy to go to bed with a man before she knows him. However, she finds this increasingly difficult as their common interests and rapport build over time. Projecting this attitudinal and behavioral pattern into a marriage presents a

discouraging prospect. Inability to meet sexual needs with her respected marriage partner is one consequence. Another is necessary reliance upon casual sex with strangers. This perpetuation of the Type A syndrome may lead the Sex Tease into a frustrating unhappy matrimonial future.

But what about the Type A woman who is not a Sex Tease? She may achieve marriage by making a deal, agreeing to supply sex if her mate makes it legal. She continues to play her perceived WIN-LOSE with sex after marriage. Mainly, it becomes a source of personal power that helps her get her way. Subtly or openly she bargains with her body giving or withholding favors. To the extent that she dominates her husband with sexual power, she thinks she WINS, but to a husband who knows he is perceived as a LOSEr, the situation may become intolerable.

Males

When male persons in America operate as Type A people, they find themselves in harmony with many traditions. Treating women as faceless sex objects, viewing them as inferior beings, and conceptualizing having sexual relations with a woman as a triumph of power are as American as baseball and apple pie. Truly the roots of the Playboy philosophy are strong and deep, and extend far into our past. Type A men may dominate the magazines of America but Type B men are "coming out of the closet." A Type B man finds it more

rewarding to participate in sexual activities with a woman who joins him as an equal rather than as an object to be conquered.

To the Type A man, a woman with whom he has a date became a "target for tonight." Like Woody Allen in "Play It Again, Sam," he has a script for all such occasions. He is programmed to score. Every detail of the evening is planned to lower and overcome resistance. From courtly and gracious conduct to spending excessive amounts of money, everything that happens is manipulated to develop in the female strong feelings of obligation. When the moment of truth comes, the male appeals to a desire to help relieve a fellow human in distress and makes a less-than-subtle suggestion that it is only fair to repay the man for effort and money expended. In this battle, males exercise raw power. In no way can both participants score a WIN. If the woman holds her ground and refuses sex, her victory has a bitter taste because she knows she has been set up and severely pressured, and because of unpleasantness surrounding her refusal. Male resentment knows no bounds, for he feels that he abundantly earned the sex he did not get. The outcome is even less satisfactory for both people than the consequences of most sex games in which one person wishes to have power over another.

But what happens if the woman submits to aggression? The man attains his intended objective, but his victory too may

have a bitter taste for he has confirmed his conviction that women can be bought. Buying a human being in our contemporary society is not a praiseworthy act. It produces some degree of guilt in the purchaser. He rationalizes this feeling by recalling the universal wishful belief of the male on the make--"All women need it, they just don't know it." All of this mental maneuvering does not relieve the nasty feelings about his perceived WIN, particularly when he likes and respects the woman he treated as a sex object. He cannot feel entirely good about coercing her into intercourse.

The more sensitive Type A man may pick up cues from the woman which let him deduce what she is thinking and feeling. He may sense that she feels guilty, has lowered her self concept, and that the feeling of being used outweighs possible benefits. As a consequence she is unable to relax and enjoy the experience. The realization that he is using an inert female body for purposes of masturbation sometimes dawns upon the Type A male aggressor. What he probably does not pick up unless she is resentful enough or open enough to tell him is a complex of rather durable thoughts that take over her conscious mind. "I ought to have handled this better," "I wanted him to think well of me and like me for myself," "He is a selfish and egocentric brute," "I'm furious! This is totally unfair," or "I might as well face the truth, to men I am just a piece of ass." This persistent and frustrating

monologue not only makes a woman an unresponsive partner in intersex, but stays with her for some time. A few such expe-riences and she may discover that she hates men, and, ultimately, sex.

We should mention that there are two kinds of Type A men--those who follow through and those who run away. The follow through fellows create the havoc we have just described by attacking without mercy until they achieve penetration or are turned away by the female. But even a universal acceptance of the ideal that the male shall overcome does not endow all men with the ability to crush the opposition and seize victory. For one thing, many Type A men do not have that kind of confi-dence in themselves. Others are male versions of the Sex Tease. They talk and act a very potent role, but if their bluffs are called, they fizzle out like a damp firecracker. These men live in constant fear of being unable to produce on demand, a weakness no self-respecting Type A male can admit.

Other basically Type A men keep intersex at a superficial gamesmanship level. Because they cannot tolerate the thought of rolling roughshod over a fellow human being, yet feel driven to prove themselves in the sexual arena, they mount campaigns as their objectives. Some heavy petting, or "copping a feel" is scored as a WIN. The superficial game player leaves the woman who loses to him with mixed feelings. She is relieved at not having to fight the final battle but tends to interpret the man's turnabout as rejection, probably due to his decision

that she really is not sexually attractive after all. She ends up as frustrated as though she had lost to the Type A "follow through" man, with many of the same negative and destructive thoughts that persist over time.

An interesting match is the female Sex Tease who encounters the Type A male superficial game player. She leads him on and he rushes ahead, only to turn away just before reaching the threshold of commitment. The rapid progress to involvement convinces the Sex Tease that victory will certainly be hers, and soon. When the game player abruptly forfeits the contest she is left in limbo. She has not won the game she thought she was playing, but he did run away, which is evidence she had the power, but the ending is inexplicable to her. The Type A male superficial game player and the Sex Tease Type A female are best equipped to deal with each other.

The WIN-WIN Intersex Dyad

We have noted ways in which contemporary American culture has preconditioned women along the Type A lines of interpretation of intersexual communication. As a result, most females must undergo a prolonged intellectualization of elements in physical heterosexual involvement, working through their own experiences repeatedly, before they can move significantly toward becoming Type B people. The same is true of men. An equally heroic effort to understand his attitudes and behaviors is required for a Type A male to evolve into a

Type B person. Because of the self-centered, egocentric characteristics of most Type A people, it is nearly impossible for them to become one of the partners in a true joint venture. Encounters of this type, however, with Types A and B locking into mutual purposing, if only for a moment or so, are part of the working through of experiences for Type A individuals.

In the ideal Type B interaction neither participant has a script. There are no expectations, no anticipations, no individually specified terminal behaviors. The Type B notion that beginning an episode of intersex without prestructuring the event (planning what is to happen) seems unreal and unnatural to those who have operated on a strategy level in interpersonal relations for most of their lives. The joint venture actualization of a heterosexual relationship requires that both people be free to adjust to each other, moment to moment. This sensitivity is possible only when the internal monologue of both participants ceases to be directive, and mutually purposeful verbal and nonverbal dialogue results. Freedom to build something together is inversely proportional to the amount of influence exerted by the previously formed intentions of the interactants, i.e., their scripts.

Just as unreal and unnatural to the Type A person is the mutual decision not to continue a relationship to intercourse. Decision to stop is like all Type B developments, a product of two persons interacting openly. Given the positive

attitudes of his suggesting intercourse spontaneously as an appropriate sharing of intimacy and her being honored by the invitation, or vice versa, the go or no-go outcome need not affect the feelings the persons involved have for each other. From their togetherness a decision emerges. Because it comes from their emotions and cognitions combined in context, it has validity. No decision reached by applying external and arbitrary criteria could fit their unique circumstances as well. As a result, Type B people can and often do feel good about deciding not to go ahead.

Summary

What we have just implied is that becoming a Type B man or woman in America in the Twentieth Century requires much critical thinking and effective self-persuasion. But most of all it requires a willingness to be open ("to stand before each other in the nakedness of our real selves") in a relationship, to become one with another individual to form the minimal satisfaction unit of participation in intersex communication--the joint venture dyad. It might be helpful for parents, rather than telling their children about the birds and the bees, to teach them about the B's and the A's.